

MHRH and Behavioral Health Network Collaborates with Law Enforcement Community Dan Sergeant, MHRH Web Team

Law enforcement officers are asked to respond to situations that fall in the realm of behavioral health crisis. As such, traditional interventions used for criminal offenses are not the most effective to be used in interacting with a behavior health individual. Understanding and recognizing the signs and symptoms of a mental illness or an individual in a behavioral health crisis is needed to resolve the situation.

Richard Crino, Vice-President of Acute Services at NRI Community Services, and Lieutenant Robin Winslow of the Coventry Police Department have spent many years working with law enforcement officials in identifying and responding to behavioral health crises. Last September 24 – 26, 18 officers from nine law enforcement departments across Rhode Island attended an MHRH funded program presented by Richard Crino and Lieutenant Winslow at the Coventry police station. Officers were instructed on how to recognize someone in a behavioral health crisis and then how to deal with the patient in a manner that emphasizes safety and de-escalation. The training emphasizes dialogue and non-threatening body language.

Among the other training materials used in the program were a simulated “Auditory Hallucination” – a recording of sound effects and muttering designed to simulate an auditory hallucination – to teach law enforcement officer how to empathize with the individual; a pre and post test for understanding and knowledge is given; and role-playing scenarios to allow law enforcement officers to test their skills in a behavioral health crisis.

The officers are also prepared to be “first responders: – the idea being that the first to respond to a call about an individual with a behavioral health crisis has the opportunity to resolve the situation in the in the safest manner. The officers will be expected to take what they have learned and train others in their department with these skills. More importantly, the goal is to eventually have the information from the program disseminate from the certified trainers to every police department and officer in the state.

MHRH Director, Craig Stenning, committed \$30,000 in funding for the implementation of the curriculum and the initiation of a certification board.

On Thursday, March 5, a ceremony was held at the Kent County Courthouse honoring and certifying 12 police officers. Attendance from many police departments, consumer advocacy groups and the behavioral health network attended. The speakers from the honorable Judge LaFazia to MHRH Director Craig Stenning acknowledged this program as a great first step to continued collaboration between all involved.

Inspired by the success of the September session, the Rhode Island Council of Community Mental Health Organizations has agreed with MHRH funding to organizing another train the trainer training for the dates of April 28-30.